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CHILDREN AND TEXTILES.

A RECORD OF EXPERIENCE.

BY FLORENCE L. SANVILLE, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY OF THE CONSUMERS' LEAGUE OF PHILADELPHIA.

OVER a year has passed since a well-known writer, dying, left her written message on what she considered a matter of burning importance in public economy to-day—the welfare of wage-earning children, expressed as the “child-labor problem,” as it exists in the South. It is greatly to be regretted that Miss Magruder should have left as her final word, an almost unqualified defence of the labor of young children in factories.

With an associate, I have given some weeks to work as a “mill-hand” in various factories, confining my efforts to one of the great textile industries. My object in doing this has been to question at closer range certain convictions that have been growing during five years of study and work in social and industrial matters. By this method I hoped to become more naturally and closely acquainted with the girls and children whose daily work took them into the mills, than would have been possible without the removal of the artificial barriers that have been raised between hand-workers and head-workers.

Pennsylvania happens to be the State to which my study has been largely confined. The variety of her great industries, and the existence of a long-settled native population together with a tremendous proportion of foreign workers, give to Pennsylvania some characteristics common to almost any other industrial State one may choose. The industries which best characterize her, however, are perhaps her mining, soft and hard; her textiles—knit, silk and woollen goods, as well as carpets and rugs; and her glass manufactures—all of them child-employing industries.

The regulation of the employment of children in industry is comprised in two sets of laws, and is under the jurisdiction of two separate departments—the Departments of Mine Inspection and of Factory Inspection. The mining law forbids the employment of boys under twelve years in bituminous mines; under fourteen years about anthracite mines; and under sixteen in anthracite mines. No female is allowed to work in or about any mine.

The factory law prohibits the employment of children under fourteen in any industrial establishment; limits the hours of work for children under sixteen to twelve in a day, and sixty in a week; and forbids work after nine at night to all such children, except boys employed in certain exempted industries. So far as the apparent aim of the law is concerned, Pennsylvania seems thus to have established a fourteen-year-old limit for her wage-earning children—except for the curiously neglected boys in the soft-coal mines. This entire aim, however, is completely thwarted by the neglect of the State to require some evidence of a child's age at the time of his application for a working certificate. As a consequence, it is doubtful if Pennsylvania is restraining her children under fourteen from work to a much greater extent than the Southern States, which, Tennessee excepted, all legally allow work at an earlier age than does the Keystone State.

As this article goes to press, there is being considered by the Legislature of Pennsylvania a measure for the regulation of Child Labor, which, if enacted, will radically change conditions in the State. The most important points in this measure include an adequate system of issuing work certificates for children upon proper evidence of age, which will insure their being actually fourteen years old; the raising of the age limit in bituminous mines from twelve to fourteen years; the establishment of a ten-hour day and fifty-eight-hour week for women and children; the prohibition of night-work after nine o'clock for children under sixteen, and after ten o'clock for girls under eighteen.

It is curious that the form of unbelief most characteristic of a sceptic on this subject is his doubt of what is the most obvious fact of all—*viz.*, that there *are* actually in Pennsylvania, as in the Southern States, a vast number of children under the age of fourteen at work in factories and mills and workshops. That doubt should be the one (in the entire matter) most easily removed; if the doubter distrusts the statements of those who have

seen, and know, nothing would be easier than for him to post himself outside the door of a sufficient number of mills at the closing hour, and to take note of what he sees. My associate and I have seen in certain factories in Pennsylvania dozens of children who by no stretch of the imagination could be considered fourteen—and sometimes not even twelve—years old. The older girls working by our side have said, in talking of the children, "Oh, they say they're *fourteen*, but of course they're not!"

The children themselves often have said the same thing of their young companions; or, by some slip, they have shown conclusively that they themselves were below the legal working-age, either at that time or at the time when they began to work. In Olyphant, a little town in the anthracite coal region, with a *total* school enrollment of 1,147, the Superintendent of Schools recently took out of the silk-mills and coal-breakers seventy-eight children in a single month who were erroneously supposed to be fourteen years of age, and at work accordingly. Evidences of this fact might be detailed indefinitely.

I am convinced that what is fundamentally true of the effect of mill environment and mill work on children in Pennsylvania, is equally true of the children of the South. The interior arrangement of the mills; the occupation of the children, carrying bobbins, whether for silk or cotton; the general atmosphere, physical and moral, of the average factory, whether North or South, must have essentially the same effect on all children subjected to the influence of these conditions. A difference in hours of work would be of considerable importance; but Pennsylvania does not vary to a great extent from the Southern States in this matter. The Northern State has gone farther in her prohibition of night-work than most of the Southern communities have done; and in her limitation of the number of hours allowed weekly she is more strict than many of these States.

Can we not, therefore, assume that the average Southern mill offers no greater "privileges and advantages" to its child-workers, such as are ascribed to it by Miss Magruder, than the average mill of the North? As I ask this question, I am faced by the basic argument of Miss Magruder's paper—upon which she affirms that the whole question hangs—the "alternative." I quote in full her opinion on the subject. She says:

"If the children employed in these mills would, otherwise, be living

in decent homes, going to school, eating wholesome and sufficient food, getting some sort of moral, mental and manual training, then, without question, mill-work for children deserves to be decried as a flagrant social evil. As it is, the alternative presented to these particular children is to live in dilapidated houses, wear wretched clothing and eat food which is inadequate in quantity and abominable in quality, and to have the constant association of other children in whom poverty and idleness have fostered vice, exactly as they would do in themselves. . . . Sad as it is that, at the age intended by nature for the mental and physical development of the young, children should be forced into work and surroundings unfavorable to these, it is a sadder sight to see children growing up in the state of mental and physical starvation which is too often the lot of the poor whites in the South."

Whether in Alabama or Pennsylvania, God forbid that we should deliberately agree to the existence of one evil, as the accepted alternative for another! Whither would such a policy, generally followed, lead us? And what interest should we be more loath to submit to so pernicious a treatment than the welfare of our children? We do not calmly advise a community to choose between probable typhoid from contaminated water, and possible death, through abstaining from the use of water; but we discuss cleaning up the supply. Are we to believe that the Southern whites—an agricultural people of native American stock—are so lost that the sole remedy is the immolation of their illiterate children to the grinding monotony of mill work?

Miss Magruder lightened the gloomy picture somewhat by ascribing definite educational advantages to mill work. It seems to me a very doubtful question whether mill life does teach children "to be clean in their dress, decent in their language, orderly and punctual in their habits, and how to use their mental and physical faculties," as she suggests. I should like to discuss, in order, these possible benefits.

There are numerous factories which present an uplifting example of well-ordered tidiness that many of the children have been wholly unaccustomed to in their own homes; and, where a painstaking management provides such surroundings, certain benefits must, no doubt, accrue to the workers, big and little; the rougher and more uncouth girls and boys are unconsciously influenced by the unaccustomed cleanliness of their environment. But such are very rare exceptions. In the very great majority of mills the children are not clean in their dress. Many of them

wear clothing more torn, stained and dirty than much that I have seen in the poorest city street.

One universal trait of cleanliness I have noticed, however, among all the mill children in whose company I have worked. With the first blow of the noon whistle, there is a rush for the sink and a scrubbing of grimy hands before dinner—which may, of course, be due equally to a desire for cleanliness, and to the normal childish desire to splash about with other children.

Decency in language I could never find fostered in any way by mill influence. As a rule, talking while at work is frowned upon, so that conversation of any sort is a surreptitious undertaking which abruptly ceases at first glimpse of the foreman, and is therefore quite uncontrolled by him. But when the dash for the air takes place at the sound of the whistle, the language is loud and coarse in the extreme. I shall not soon forget the sounds which emerged from a group of children—some clearly not more than twelve, if so much—at the close of a day's work in a miserably appointed factory. My unaccustomed ear did not detect the sound of the whistle above the noise of the machinery; but the rush for the door told me that the day's work was over—and by the time I had reached the outer air the group of children had already gathered, and the pent-up energy of an eleven-hour day (with one-half hour's intermission at noon) found vent in a flood of rough talk and profanity such as I hope never again to hear issue from young lips.

Just as doubtful is the value of mill training in developing “order and punctuality in habits, and the use of mental and physical faculties.” Even in the better class of factories, it is a question whether these qualities are really developed. Miss Jane Addams says, “We naturally associate a factory with orderly, productive action; but similarity of action without identical thought and co-operative intelligence is coercion, not order.”* In many factories, as the last echo of the morning whistle dies, the main doors are barred, and the child who is late is either docked his wages, roundly scolded for tardiness or excluded altogether for the day—as the case may be. The windows of a large number—perhaps the majority—of mills, are painted over their lower half; and when I have asked a fellow-worker why, the answer has been

* “Newer Ideals of Peace,” p. 173.

invariably, "So's we don't waste time lookin' out." In summer, only the upper half of these windows is opened. Obedience to the sadly prevalent rule against sitting down is generally insured by the absence of seats. But, when the foreman is safely beyond vision, a stolen rest is secured for a moment, on the floor, on a heap of empty spools, on the projecting edge of a frame—anything that may serve the need of overtaxed nature.

Is this method of securing conformity to rules anything else than force? Is it comparable with the educative discipline and co-operation of a school?

If, then, I am compelled to doubt whether mill work offers any distinct educational advantages to children, have I any reason to believe that positive harm is wrought by it? Here again I draw my conclusions almost entirely from my own observations and experiences. By "children," in this discussion, I mean all workers under sixteen; and that which applies to children over fourteen is, obviously, of still greater weight for the unacknowledged multitudes under that age, now working in our industries.

The physical effect of work upon a growing boy or girl depends, of course, upon the nature of the work, and the conditions under which it is performed. I do not wish to overlook establishments which make every provision for the welfare of their employees, young and old. But, even in such surroundings, I am deeply convinced that work which might be without detriment for a short working-day is distinctly harmful when carried to the legal limit of sixty hours a week. And, in mills of lower grade, incalculable harm is done both by the conditions provided and by the work required.

As an adequate description of the widely varying sanitary conditions in the mills where I have worked would require far too much space, I shall speak only in the most general terms. Usually there is a relatively large floor-space for the number of employees, and this should insure a plentiful supply of wholesome air. But very frequently the windows are kept closed—a custom often required by the nature of the material—and no other means of ventilation is substituted. When to the resultant heaviness of the air is added the nauseating odors arising from many kinds of raw textile material, and, above all, the foul atmosphere from the unspeakable "sanitation" of some mills, the effect must be harmful in the extreme. A certain mill in which I worked has the

bulk of its spinning done in the cellar. In summer, when I saw it, the cement floor was dry, and the cool dampness of the place was doubtless grateful to the workers. But I had a mental vision of that uncovered, cold floor and low brick ceiling in winter. I was not surprised to be told by one of the girls that "Lots of the girls has consumption here; sometimes they're awful sick."

The type of work required from the children—especially the girls—is sometimes far beyond their strength. One very common variety of such work in silk-mills is that imposed upon the little "lacers," who tie with pieces of interwoven tape the skeins of silk which have come from the reels. In better-regulated factories, the reels—movable structures of wood and iron, about six feet long, and weighing anywhere from fifteen to forty-five pounds—are carried to and from the frames on which they turn by grown youths employed for the purpose. But I have seen not only the older girls who work on the reels, but the little girls who do the lacing, struggling under the weight of these awkward burdens as a regular part of their daily task. Of course, these were machines of the lighter type; one of the heavier variety I tried in vain even to lift, in another factory where men were employed to do this work. The logical outcome of such work was made very clear to me by a girl who had been employed in one factory for eleven years. In talking over work together, she said to me: "I used to be on the reels. But I was hurt inside by having to carry the reels, and had to stop work. So, when I come back, the doctor wouldn't let me do it no more."

For the average child, the beginning of a wage-earning career in a factory marks the end of the stage of mental acquisitiveness. The child under fourteen has not, by any chance, reached the point at which the period of active receptivity, or of the desire for original expression, can safely be brought to a stop. Whatever other benefits might be ascribed to mill work, opportunity for this variety of mental growth could not be justly included by its most ardent advocate. England attempts a compromise, by requiring for her children under fourteen a given number of hours of schooling for every corresponding number of hours of work. But it is open to grave doubt whether a child of twelve can profit by a period of instruction after five hours of the clattering confinement of a mill.

Fourteen years seem to have been generally accepted here as

the age at which a child may legitimately take up the burden of breadwinning. I do not know whether this division is a more or less arbitrary one, or is fixed upon some psychological basis. But I think that the average child who has attended school regularly up to the age of fourteen, has at his command a certain mental equipment which some kinds of work may well increase and develop. For the factory child, however, this is scarcely ever true; what further development is coming to him must come through a well-directed surplus of energy outside of work hours. Too long hours, or too exhausting work, preclude such a surplus. The girls in an industrial school in a small mining town showed, according to the testimony of their teacher, an utter incapacity for self-help, initiative or order. All had been working—some of them since early childhood—sixty hours a week.

Even the more advanced varieties of work performed by children in a textile mill require no thought, little but purely mechanical skill, and are of a deadening monotony. A child will continue to "tie up ends" while her eyes are apparently roving about the room, or she is engaged in surreptitious conversation with her nearest neighbor. Concentrated thought is no more developed there than are the faculties of true order and self-control.

The physical and mental welfare of mill children is thus affected, I think, by influences which are inherent in the system and the work, irrespective, largely, of the individual establishment. The action of mill life upon the moral nature of the child is, of course, still more dependent upon the factory in which he is employed. It is quite reasonable to suppose that the child of a sordid, ill-kept home may catch his first glimpse of decency and cleanliness or receive his first contact with a higher type of companion, within the carefully supervised precincts of a well-conducted mill. On the other hand, the dangers of moral contamination to which young mill workers are sometimes exposed, are serious in the extreme. I shall not soon forget a noon-hour in the gloomy and ill-kept spinning-room of a Philadelphia textile mill, a "playtime," that was utilized by the young boys and girls—the merest children, who were not allowed out-of-doors—for the coarsest and most promiscuous actions and talk—all utterly without supervision. In this respect this mill was no exception.

Regular night-work for girls of sixteen, which is legal in Pennsylvania, is occasionally, but no longer commonly, found in

the silk industry. A few years ago, girls were much more generally employed on the night shift. But so shocking was the testimony given by some of these young girls, during the proceedings of the Anthracite Coal Commission, in 1905, that through force of public opinion the custom has been generally abandoned.

A recent example of the possible dangers involved for children in a mill environment was given me by the Superintendent of the Organized Charities of a large town in Pennsylvania. Three little girls who had worked in the silk-mill of a neighboring small mining community had been led astray by a grown companion in the mill, and enticed into an evil resort in close proximity to it. The ages of the children ranged from fifteen years down, and all three now are in the House of Refuge—an institution in which an undue proportion of girls from the textile industry are, for some reason, enrolled. The citation of this occurrence as an example of evil wrought might be considered unfair on the ground that the tragedy might have happened to these children had they been at school. But the atmosphere of the schoolroom, the supervision of the teacher, and the companionship of children of like age, would all have militated against the ruin of these children, just as powerfully as the influences of the mill—added to the proximity of the evil resort—worked toward the catastrophe.

In this instance, as in most others, where the moral, physical or mental welfare of a child has been sacrificed to the heedless aggrandizement of an industry, the community is obliged to pay the price. Miss Addams tells of her conversation with a tramp, who had begun work in a New England textile mill sixteen years ago, at an earlier age than the law there now allows. She says:

“He told his tale with all simplicity; and, as he made a motion with his hand, he said, ‘I done that for sixteen years.’ I give the words as he gave them. ‘At last I was sick in bed for two or three weeks with a fever, and when I crawled out, I made up my mind that I would rather go to hell than to go back to that mill.’ . . . The physician has made a diagnosis of general debility. The man is not fit for steady work. He has been whipped in the battle of life, and is spent prematurely because he began prematurely.”*

And on another page,† she points very conclusively to the futility of lavishing so great care and expense upon a public-school system, if it is to be followed by lack of interest and responsibility

* “Newer Ideals of Peace,” p. 158.

† *Ib.*, pp. 166-7.

in the child's welfare the instant he leaves the schoolroom. Is it wise to allow a couple of unregulated, exploited years, at a most critical period of a child's development, to undermine the work which a community has, with so great pains, done for him during the preceding eight years? Whether the penalty takes the form of a commitment to a House of Refuge, a bed in a free sanatorium for tuberculosis, or an arrest for vagrancy, ill-regulated child-labor is ultimately a direct burden upon the shoulders of the public. And for whose profit? From this point of view, can there be anywhere sufficient gain to justify the risk?

The ever-recurrent argument of parental poverty as a reason for child-labor is one which would require a full paper for adequate discussion, rather than a closing paragraph. I am therefore inclined to dispose of the whole matter by throwing out this one suggestion: No one comes into closer or more personal contact with the pitiable thrusts and attendant evils of poverty than do the men and women who are engaged in relief work or are living in social settlements. Yet none of these men or women has ever suggested that the miseries of poverty which beset them on all sides should be allayed by what appears to so many the most obvious means—the earnings of the young children of the family. On the contrary, one finds among them the names of the very persons who have been among the pioneers or the warmest advocates of the child-labor reform movement—Miss Wald and Mrs. Florence Kelley, of the Nurses' Settlement in New York; Mr. Woods, of South End House, Boston; Miss Richmond, of the Society for Organizing Charity, Philadelphia; Miss Addams, of Hull House, Chicago. If child-labor were wise; if it were an admissible, as it is an obvious, method of helping to solve some of the most difficult practical problems which confront them, is it reasonable to suppose that these leaders in social work would with one accord repudiate it? The actual extent of true poverty as an immediate cause of child-labor, moreover, has been proved by investigation, in one community after another, to have been greatly exaggerated.* And in the great number of cases where this plea of poverty has proved to be merely parental ignorance or negligence, or worse, the continued dependence of a father upon the efforts of his young children tends to foster in him habits of laziness and degeneracy.

* See "The Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science," January, 1907, pp. 1-9.

In cases of true need, brought about by the death or disability of the breadwinner, temporary relief to the mother is now given in many communities, until her child has reached the proper age for wage-earning.

If, then, there is much that is harmful, and little of profit to child, parent or community in the early or ill-regulated labor of children, are we to believe that it is necessary for the health and maintenance of industry? Conversation with employers and foremen, my own observations and the already recorded effects of more rigid child-labor regulations upon industries to which they have especially applied—all lead me to believe that young children are accepted in a factory as the nearest-at-hand, most readily obtained, as well as the cheapest, variety of labor; but that much time and material are wasted, and the ultimate value of the output lowered, by these undeveloped laborers.

I remember a little girl of perhaps twelve years old, who, with another much older girl, worked in a "corridor" adjacent to mine. I watched the child all morning, but could not discover that she did anything but follow listlessly after her companion—brightening only when the disappearance of the "forelady" offered a safe chance for conversation. I finally asked my "learner" (vernacular for "teacher," always) what she was doing—and she said, with a contemptuous shrug: "Oh—her! She's been here three weeks nearly, and can't even tie the knot. She ain't tryin' to, either—I don't know what they're keeping her on for. I'd slap her good, and turn her out—I would!"

And when they do learn? Not very long ago there was a strike among the weavers of a large textile mill in Philadelphia. Frequent meetings with the girls revealed to me that the strike was caused directly by a change of policy which should make the weavers responsible for certain defects in the finished product, defects which were the result of imperfect preparation of the yarn for the loom, but which the weavers were supposed to discover. "If," exclaimed one of the girls, indignantly—and of this I took special heed—"we were given anyway decent material, there wouldn't be any trouble. But they've got such little kids down there [indicating the spinning-rooms] to do the work for almost nothing, that it comes to us full of mistakes. And now they want us to pay for that!" Economy, no less than justice, is thwarted by such a system as this!

I recall the complaints of several foremen, on the impossibility of obtaining good results from the younger hands. Especially I remember one night foreman—a fine fellow, he seemed, too—who bewailed the custom of employing children on the night shift. “It’s so hard to keep them awake,” he complained—adding as a sympathetic afterthought: “It’s hard on the poor kids, too. The nights do seem awful long to them.”

Agents and superintendents are quoted as saying that they would prefer employing older workers, but that they cannot obtain them. This is not surprising; without going into the economic effects of child-labor, it is obvious that the rate of wages established by the employment of children is an insuperable obstacle to the acceptance of their positions by adults. Moreover, it is undeniably true that some industries deliberately beckon to children. An accepted authority, whose name I am not at liberty to give, told me recently that the unquestionable reason for the establishment of the silk-throwing industry in the anthracite coal-fields of Pennsylvania was not, as I had imagined, the existence of a cheap and plentiful supply of fuel, but, rather, the great supply of cheap and unrestricted labor, represented by the little girls of the families of the mining population.

The practical results of careful child-labor regulation upon a child-employing industry are shown in the manufacture of glass. The census figures record that, from 1900 to 1905, Illinois, Ohio and New York, with comparatively stringent child-labor laws, reported a far greater increase in capital invested, the number of wage-earners, and the value of the product, than did either New Jersey or Pennsylvania, with their much looser regulations for working children.

The ultimate good of an industry can never be served by those who are wearied to loathing of their task, or are too unintelligent to grasp its significance. Intelligent interest in a worker must take the place of listlessness or dislike, if the results of his toil are to show anything of beauty and charm. To expect such interest from untrained minds and tired young bodies is too much. And the removal of this enforced, unnatural toil would thus work toward the true betterment of an industry, even while it is bringing about that still greater and more vital result—the enrichment of the life-blood of our nation.

FLORENCE L. SANVILLE.